BETRAYAL
MATTHEW 21:1-11; 26:47-50
APRIL 7, 1974 PALM SUNDAY

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
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Palm Sunday is an enigma; a day that began grandly but ended in a fiasco: a ticker-tape parade for a conquering hero that turned, in an astonishingly brief period of time, into a mob scene screaming for his death: a party that turned into a lynching party. There is inspiring grandeur in the event this day celebrates - Jesus Christ making his entrance to the capital city of his nation: a grandeur expressed in the favorite Palm Sunday hymn:

Ride on! Ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp, ride on to die;
Bow thy meek head to mortal pain
Then take, O God, Thy power, and reign.

But there is also about this day a lot that is human and petty and ambiguous. There is a cloud over it all: we know how it will end. For this was the event in his life that set in motion a complex of forces that would, in five days, result in his crucifixion.

It is not a particularly simple day. William Stringfellow observes that Palm Sunday is the occasion on which Christians go to Church for the wrong reasons: that we keep returning to Palm Sunday with nostalgia for the parade. And indeed, that is how the church - all too often - observes it. A day of triumph: a kingly day when for once Jesus received the kind of treatment he deserved. There is an inherent romanticism in the image of people laying Palm branches and the coats from their backs in his path. It conjures up visions of the American troops liberating Paris - or John Glenn on Wall Street. But it is more complex than that; more enigmatic....

Consider - the planned intentionality of what happened. He chose to ride on the back of a donkey, for instance: something he had never done before. It was a short distance from Bethany to Jerusalem, and it was totally out of character forhim to ride instead of walk. Except for the fact that the prophet Zechariah had promised that it would happen that way:

"Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is he
humble and riding on an ass...."

He knew that when the people who were in the city saw him they would immediately remember that prophetic promise. He knew that they would see in him the promised Messiah. That is what he wanted them to see. It was an announcement: clear-without equivocation: "I am the one for whom you have been waiting: I am the fulfillment of God's promise to your fathers."

Consider the reaction of the people. It is far too simple to regard it as a "welcome to the city party." In the first place the ones who welcomed him were not residents of the city at all. They were, in all probability, Galileans who knew him, or who had heard about him, common, country folk who were in the holy city to celebrate the Passover. That is to say they had come to their capital - the city that symbolized the identity and past and existence of Israel as God's people - to celebrate and remember the event that had established them as a nation - namely their liberation from slavery in Egypt. It was a passionately patriotic occasion; made more intense by the simple fact that they were not free: that they were still oppressed by foreigners. And so when a man had the audacity and courage to ride into that tinder-box in the precise way the Messiah - the liberator - was supposed to come, they went wild.

Consider the reaction of the authorities. One has to assume that they were reacting to the crowd more than they were to him. After all they asked, "Who is this?" The city people didn't know him. The authorities, that is - the Temple Priests, the Scribes, Pharisees and Saducees - may have heard rumors about some of the things he had said and done back in Galilee. but that's all. There is no reason to believe that the Romans had any opinion about him at all. But the Jewish authorities knew trouble when they saw it. And a crowd of ruffians from the country, organizing a

parade to welcome somecne who looked suspiciously like a self-styled revolutionary - spelled "trouble" in capital letters. The last thing they needed was a revolution - or even a riot.

And so it was a complex, not a simple, day. A lot of forces were set in motion. And in and through it all there was a pivotal role played by a man named Judas, one of the twelve. I have an idea that it was this day - the dangerous complexity of what transpired on this day - that forced Judas into making a fateful decision.

"Betrayal" is a nasty word. History's worst epitaphs are reserved for traitors. Acts of betrayal are remembered for centuries. Benedict Arnold the Rosenbergs, Quizling - a man whose name has become synonymous with treason. Dante placed Judas in the lowest, last circle of hell - alone. Treason and betrayal have always accompanied the political processes of mankind: but the men who have done it have reaped humanity's ripest contempt. Plutarch wrote that "Caesar said he loved the treason, but hated the traitor."

There are, I would suggest, two kinds of betrayal. One is the product of cowardice, greed; the work of men who have no principals, no convictions, no loyalties. But there is another kind of betrayal that results from high ideals,great courage, deep convictions. This is the kind of treason that happens when a man changes his mind: when he is convinced that truth lies somewhere other than the path he is following: when loyalty to persons institutions, governments suddenly must be sacrificed because of a deeper loyalty to conscience. Into this category fall men like Patrick Henry, Sam Adams, Robert-E. Lee., Judas? Perhaps. But first, what did he do, actually?

After Palm Sunday the Jewish authorities had a problem. If they were to prevent a popular uprising against Rome, they had to get the instigator out of the way, quietly and as quickly as possible. But they couldn't do it publically because the people - the rough Galileans would

surely riot. What they needed was a place to arrest him - a quiet, remote place, preferably under the cover of darkness. And they needed some positive way to identify him. Remember, they had never seen him before, and to them all Galilieans probably looked the same.

And so Judas provided the place and the method. He was the treasurer of the little band of disciples, by the way. One of his responsibilities would have been to make the room and board arrangements forthe week. He knew where they would be eating on Thursday evening. And so, for thirty pieces of silver he agreed to lead a group of Temple guards to Jesus, and to identify him by greeting him with a kiss - the traditional method of greeting between Rabbi and disciple. It was as simple as that.

What is not so simple is why he did it. Into what category of betrayal did he fall? I think it is a gross over-simplification to reason that Judas was a treacherous liar through and through. It not only is unfair to him it prevents us from learning very much through his experience. It took courage to follow Jesus in the first place: it took commitment and a willingness to sacrifice to stay with him: it took integrity to be the trusted treasurer. This was no unprincipaled coward. Nor am I convinced that greed had much to do with it. The value of thirty pieces of silver has been estimated at about $25.00. Not much money, really. Particularly for the treasurer.

I believe, rather, that Judas's betrayal grew out of his convictions: that he became convinced that it was the right thing to do: that he had to do it. It could have been that he wanted to avoid the conflict that he saw coming. He may have been a "law and order" man, who knew that an aroused populace waving palm branches and shouting patriotic slogans would bring down the wrath of Rome on the whole nation. And so it would be better to arrange for his arrest - quietly - to get him out of the way.

Or it could have been that Judas was a revolutionary: that he was thrilled with what he saw developing: that he actually believed that Jesus

would organize the people, siege political power and drive out the Romans. It could have been that Judas wanted to arrange a show down - a situation in which Jesus would act aggressively and thus set off the conflict.

Or it could have been that his revolutionary fervor, his passionate patriotism was so severly disappointed that he did it as an act of rage at having so wasted the prior three years.

I am convinced that Judas did not mean for it to end as it did. His remorse after the crucifixion; his attempt to return the money; his suicide tell me that this was a tortured man who had seen something he thought was an act of high courage turn into an unmitigated disaster. He didn't mean for Jesus to be crucified. Whatever his motives for betraying him he didn't intend this.

I discovered this week that the word for "kiss" used in Matthew and Mark is not the ordinary word for the traditional greeting between Rabbi and Disciple. Instead the Greek here means a fond, affectionate kiss. Which leads me again to conclude that it is just too simple to explain the act of betrayal in terms of greed and treachery.

Sometimes life does that to us. I can remember one time arranging a fight for my younger brother: I had concluded that he needed to assert himself - that he could do it and should do it. But he lost - and it looked like betrayal. Jean Paul Sartre wrote a short story, The Wall, in which a man condemned to die decided to fool his captors one last time. When given the opportunity to trade his life for revealing the whereabouts of another man, he fabricated a complex tale about a secret hide-out in a cemetary, and then waited to enjoy the rage of his captors when they discovered how foolish he had made them look. But when they return he is reprieved, and learns that by some freak coincidence his friend was hiding in the cemetary and was executed on the spot. He was a traitor - by accident. Sometimes life does that kind of thing to us.

The betrayal of Judas, finally, was a result of his failure to see the

truth about Jesus Christ. And in that failure he was not unlike a lot of men ever since. Judas followed Jesus as friend, master,teacher. He committed himself to following one he had come to believe was the Son of God. But when that Son of God confronted the city of Jerusalem in love instead of might Judas backed off. Why should God's Son have to suffer? Why in the world should God want to disclose himself in humiliation, pain and death? And that brings us to the question men have always asked, and are still asking.

Why, if there is a God of love and mercy, is there suffering in the world? Why cancer? Why birth defects? Why do good men die? Why tornadoes? Why Monticello? Why, if God cares and is merciful, are we forced continually to ask "why"?

What Palm Sunday means, and what Judas tragically misunderstood, is that God does not use his power in that way. He did not use his power to prevent the suffering and death of his own Son. Instead he values the freedom of the world he has created: a freedom that can result in crucifixion and cancer and tornadoes. Palm Sunday means that in Jesus Christ God submits to that same freedom: that his greatest gift to us is not some easy escape from whatever life hands out - but the promise that he experiences it with us - and the assurance that no matter what happens his love for us abides.

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" is the way the prophet put it. Could we ever have known the depth of God's love if it had been otherwise? Could we have trusted that love to keep us ultimately and eternally safe - if Jesus Christ had been some antiseptic hero? I think not. God has come closest to us precisely in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ -Judas didn't understand that - or rather Judas learned that after it was too late. Judas died of a broken heart - when he realized finally how deeply he was loved.

That, finally, is the unwriteen conclusion to his story. Unlike

Caesar who loved the treason and hated the traitor; Jesus Christ hated the treason and loved the betrayer. Judas betrayed himself. Nothing he did could keep God from loving him. Not even a cross stopped God's love.

It is customary in sermons that deal with Judas Iscariot to include a recital of all the ways we betray our Lord. It is customary on Palm Sunday to point how like that crowd we are - welcoming him one day and desserting him the next. It is an ancient custom to burn the palms that are given out on this day to provide the ashes of penetance. That is all very much to the point.

But even more to the point is that on this day Jesus Christ identified totally with us: that he came to the city - and there bore pain and suffering and death. Even more important than our guilt - our petty, unintentional betrayals - is his love for us: a love that can help us to stand when life tumbles in: a love big enough to encompass whatever treason we have committed.

We have it all over that first Palm Sunday crowd. They shouted and waved at the right man for the wrong reasons. You and I know how it ends. For us., this enigma; this very real day of triumph and betrayal can be a celebration of God's love for us.

May it be so. AMEN

FATHER, help us this week to know again the power of your love. As we sing our hosannas to our Lord, help us to receive him anew in our hearts.
AMEN